

## **Alfred Lord Tennyson and Visual Culture**

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## Alfred Lord Tennyson and Visual Culture

The starting point for this paper is an ongoing curatorial project that explores the visual culture associated with the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). Tennyson's childhood in Lincolnshire has left the county with a rich collection of the poet's manuscripts, books and associated illustrative material, which will form the basis of a major exhibition to mark the bicentenary of his birth in 2009.<sup>1</sup> While Tennyson's poetry has frequently been examined in relation to Victorian visual culture, studies are usually restricted to one medium or text - this exhibition will seek to give a sense of the range of visual material associated with Tennyson's. As a result the exhibition is not about Tennyson so much as how Victorian culture worked upon Tennyson, not about poetry but how painters, designers, photographers, sculptors and film makers expressed contemporary anxieties and beliefs through Tennyson's work in the period from 1850 to 1914. Underlying the logic of this exhibition is the idea that word and image have a complex and uneasy relationship but that through this relationship a semantic richness emerges that would not have been possible through the written word alone. In short, the meanings surrounding Tennyson's poetry are wider and more complex because his work was taken up so enthusiastically by creative practitioners in the visual arts.

The poet himself was very adept at making money from his publications, but did not always see eye to eye with his illustrators. The controversies over Edward Moxon's famous edition of Tennyson in 1857 caused a lot of ill feeling for poet, publisher and illustrators and the situation did not improve when Moxon commissioned Daniel Maclise to illustrate an edition of *The Princess*.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1, a page from Tennyson's own copy of this edition clearly states his opinion of one of Maclise's images. Lorraine Kooistra's



Figure 1: Tennyson's own copy of *The Princess* illustrated by Daniel Maclise, 1859.

Notice Tennyson's annotation 'wrong!'

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recent research on this commission suggests that Tennyson's frustration implies a recognition that Maclise's illustrations were in competition with his poetic voice and that the book's status as a 'Christmas Gift Book' threatened his cultural authority as Poet Laureate.<sup>3</sup> As this example makes clear, the relationship between an image or object associated with a literary source is rarely simple. Through a survey of recent research this paper will demonstrate just how varied the relationship between a poem and its visual manifestation can be. The first example, *The Lady of Shalott*, was extensively illustrated and the varied interpretations highlight the poem's ambiguity. Secondly Roger Fenton's, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* illustrates how a bleak photograph was filled with meaning due to a contemporary war and Tennyson's poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Finally the paper will consider Julia Margaret Cameron's idiosyncratic but undeniably creative interpretation of Tennyson's medievalist poetry, which can be seen as an attempt to re-author the poems.

### *The Lady of Shalott*

*The Lady of Shalott*, was written in the early 1830s but published in its familiar form in 1842.<sup>4</sup> According to Christine Poulson over fifty works of art can be related to the poem from the 1850s to the early twentieth century and whole exhibitions have been mounted just on this subject.<sup>5</sup> The poem describes the situation of a lone woman imprisoned in a tower beside a river that runs down from the city of Camelot. She is trapped by a curse that prevents her from looking out of her room on the world outside. Instead she looks at a mirror in which she sees a reflection of the world and this reflection forms the basis for a tapestry that she weaves on a loom. At a key moment Sir Lancelot rides out and appears in her mirror, at which point it breaks and the curse is activated. Resigned she lies down in a boat and floats down to Camelot where the knights are mildly distressed. The poem, like most of Tennyson's best work, is ambiguous and the variety of visual responses to the poem play on and tease out this ambiguity. Two sections dominate visual interpretations: the moment that the mirror breaks and the Lady floating down the river on the point of death. Three examples of the former will suffice here.

Given the subject matter it is not surprising that the dominant interpretative framework is that of gender: the image of a woman who can only break free of isolation and celibacy by the bringing a fatal curse upon herself clearly has much to say about mid Victorian attitudes toward gender and the prevalent 'separate spheres' ideology. William Holman Hunt's famous image takes what might be considered the patriarchal line. This was first conceived in an illustration to Moxon's edition of Tennyson, published in 1857 (figure 2) and the image then formed the basis for the famous large scale oil painting (Wadsworth Collection, Connecticut) executed between 1886 and 1905.<sup>6</sup> Hunt later confirmed that he interpreted the poem as a story about the dereliction of duty: although the nature of the 'curse' is not defined in the poem Hunt saw the Lady's actions as a deliberate rebellion and presumably approved of her fate. His striking image shows a muscular figure almost bursting out of the constricted space of the image with hair flailing wildly around her head: a feature not described in the poem and one to which Tennyson later objected.<sup>7</sup> As Christine Poulson has noticed, Hunt also emphasised what

he considered to be the sin of the Lady by showing her willfully ignoring an image of the crucified Christ, the model of sacrifice to duty.



Figure 2: William Holman Hunt, first proof for his illustration of *The Lady of Shalott* in *Poems* by Alfred Tennyson published by Edward Moxon in 1857.

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An earlier drawing of the incident can be interpreted as showing the other side to the story. Elizabeth Siddal is still best known as the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti who died tragically young, despite the efforts of recent critics to redress the balance.<sup>8</sup> Siddal's vivid image shows a very different figure, pious perhaps, but a victim of the curse rather someone who deserved death. Again a crucifix is included but crucially, because Siddal placed it near the window, in turning to look outside her cell the Lady is also seen turning towards Christ. In recent years Victorian Studies has ceased treating religion as necessarily patriarchal and scholarship on figures such as Christina Rossetti and Anna Jameson has stressed how women constructed positive female identities through religious discourse.<sup>9</sup> In this context Siddal's approach can be interpreted as seeking to present a positive, if doomed figure. Her Lady is both cursed and subject to circumstances beyond her control but in turning towards Christ is at least responding in a way that could have been admired within the moral framework of the mid Victorian period.

The poem's popularity among artists seems to have increased along with Tennyson's fame and many of the iconic examples date from late nineteenth or early twentieth century. One artist invariably associated with the poem is J. W. Waterhouse, who painted three major oils of the subject in 1888 (Tate Britain), 1894 (Leeds City Art Gallery), and 1915 (*I am Half-Sick of Shadows*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto). Here I would like to examine the 1894 version, which, to my mind is by far the most challenging. Waterhouse's reputation among art historians has never equaled his popularity with the public. Some of his images do lay him open to the sort of criticism that characterizes him as a painter of winsome nymphs who lure pure young men away from the straight and narrow path, a case in point being *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896,

Manchester Art Gallery). This, however, is not a valid reason to trivialise an artist of great power and sophistication. Recently Peter Trippi's monograph has gone some way to answering Waterhouse's less sympathetic critics, placing his work firmly within the competing visual discourses of second generation Pre-Raphaelitism and emerging movements in France.<sup>10</sup> The 1894 *Lady of Shalott* confirms Waterhouse's active and contemporary engagement with Tennyson's text. Of great interest here is the difference between the large-scale oil sketch (Falmouth Art Gallery) and the finished version. The face in the former is clearly an example of the standard Waterhouse type (not unlike the nymphs described above) but the finished version shows a far more disturbed figure, one that Christine Poulson has likened to a 'hunted animal at bay'.<sup>11</sup> Waterhouse's alteration to the oil sketch and his continued exploration of the figure's unusual and vivid posture, all testify to his attempt to get beyond both Hunt's defiant Lady and Siddal's pious victim.<sup>12</sup> Waterhouse's Lady is unnerving for the viewer: her stare suggests that she is out of control and in lurching towards the viewer with her lower legs bound by the magical yarn, almost seems in danger of falling out of the picture frame.<sup>13</sup> Waterhouse may have borrowed the idea of the yarn from Hunt but despite this sign that the artists were influenced by each other's work, there should be little doubt of his personal engagement with the poetry. Waterhouse's personal copy of *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* still exists and the blank pages at the beginning and end of the volume are covered in sketches.<sup>14</sup> Several sketches relate to his 1915 version of *The Lady of Shalott* but arguably one of the most fascinating experiences on inspecting the book is turning to the start of the poem in question. Near the title for *The Lady of Shalott* is a tiny roundel (about 25 mm diameter) that is just big enough to show the round mirror divided by the reflection of the mullion of the opposite window, an important compositional motif in both the later versions of the subject. Pearce's speculation that the works of artists such as Waterhouse and Meteyard 'owe more to each other and the iconographic traditions of half a century than they do to their nominal source' correctly identifies the cumulative visual tradition surrounding the poem but is simplistic in its approach to the relationship between poetry and painting.<sup>15</sup> Waterhouse's book cannot but suggest that for him there was an intimate relationship between reading and drawing and that he used his own imaginative experience of the poem in the creation of his paintings.

### ***The Valley of the Shadow of Death and The Charge of the Light Brigade***

Roger Fenton's photograph *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* taken during the Crimean War in 1854 and exhibited at the Gallery of the Society of Painters in Water Colour in 1855 presents a complete visual contrast to a Waterhouse painting. The image is impressively bleak, showing an almost featureless landscape devoid of any signs of human habitation. The composition of the photograph to some extent conforms to the conventions of the painterly genre especially in the relationship between the foreground and the middle ground, which are divided by a track that lends the image depth by fading into the distance. Fenton scouted the camera position carefully but was prevented from using his 'best point' because it was too exposed to Russian artillery fire. The fact that he felt his image might have been too empty is also suggested by the difference between the two photographs that he took from the same point: one shows a number of additional

cannon balls scattered on the track, which must have been placed there deliberately by Fenton and his assistants.<sup>16</sup>

Despite its lack of human interest, this image soon became invested with a whole range of meanings largely due to its relationship with Tennyson's famous poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The photograph does not depict the site of the misguided military event but was named 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death' by soldiers because of 'the quantity of Russian balls that have fallen in it'.<sup>17</sup> Although the title clearly echoes the biblical source in Psalms, both Victorian and more recent critics link it with the refrain from Tennyson's poem: 'Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred.'<sup>18</sup> Few of Tennyson's poems had created such a widespread response as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Written initially in December 1854, following the military incident in October and the reports that Tennyson read in *The Times* in November, the poem was an instant success.<sup>19</sup> By the Summer of 1855 it was apparently so popular with soldiers in the Crimea that a chaplain asked Tennyson to send one thousand copies printed on broadsheets to distribute to the soldiers. Tennyson complied and when another request arrived in October 1855 another two thousand copies were dispatched. It is clear from this information alone that by the autumn of 1855, when Fenton's photograph was exhibited in London, few could have missed the link to Tennyson's poem. Most of the three hundred and twelve images exhibited by Fenton were not shown with titles, merely numbers, and as Jennifer Green-Lewis has pointed out *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* was singled out for special mention by several reviewers.<sup>20</sup> Whether the soldiers named the valley after Tennyson's poem or whether he obtained the refrain from information sent back to England from the Crimea is unclear but the way that the image and poem lend significance and meaning to each other is without doubt. Helen Groth has illustrated the extent to which this exchange of meaning depended on new ways of transferring both verbal and visual information. Photography was still in its early days but despite the awkward and intricate wet collodion process, Fenton was able to make negatives close to the battle front in a mobile dark room that he called his 'carriage'. Secondly Tennyson was able to respond in verse so soon after the event due to the recently established international telegraph system and the extensive use of this new technology by *The Times*. The sheer speed and efficiency of this complex interaction between word and image mediated by recent technological innovation generated further meanings. Groth's persuasive reading suggests that although Tennyson's poem acknowledged that 'Some one had blunder'd' implying criticism of the army hierarchy, the efficiency of the information exchange that allowed the relationship between the poem and photograph merely served to reinforce the idea of England as the centre of a colonial project: 'The idea of instantaneous communication that the invention of the telegraph introduced only consolidated the illusion that England stood at the centre of a universal information network capable of transcending the material limits of space and time.'<sup>21</sup>

### **Julia Margaret Cameron's *Idylls of the King***

Julia Margaret Cameron's photography had no pretensions towards documentary



Figure 3: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Alfred Tennyson with Book*, May 1865 Albumen Print.

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veracity. Soon after being given her first camera, she described her ambitions in a letter to her friend the astronomer Sir John Herschel: 'My aspirations are to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and Ideal and sacrificing nothing of the Truth by all possible devotion to Poetry and beauty.'<sup>22</sup> She signaled her opposition to commercial photography by rejecting verisimilitude as the criteria by which to judge a photograph, more specifically by adopting a manner that used differential rather than sharp focus. Despite her artistic aspirations she was also interested in financial rewards, motivated in part by a downturn in the family income. In 1886 one of her former models claimed that Cameron: 'had a notion that she was going to revolutionize photography and make money.'<sup>23</sup> She was also aware of the financial potential of linking her images to the increasingly famous Poet Laureate. One result was that Cameron took Tennyson's portrait seven times, the most famous example being the image that Tennyson said made him look like a 'Dirty Monk' (figure 3). When in 1874 Tennyson asked her to illustrate a new edition of his *Idylls of the King* she jumped at the chance, but was disappointed with the results.<sup>24</sup> Her photographs were reproduced as engravings and unsurprisingly her artistic 'out-of-focus' manner was sharpened up in the process. Undeterred by this setback she decided to bring out a far more ambitious publication: *Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King and other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron* published in two volumes between the end of 1874 and May 1875.

Cameron's books pose interesting questions about the relationship between word and image. Each photograph is preceded by an extract from the related poem written out in Cameron's handwriting and then reproduced lithographically (figure 4). Both the process of selection and the reproduction of Cameron's handwriting give the book an unusually personal feel and mark the photographs as interpretations rather than



illustrations, though she was careful to avoid pushing Tennyson too far from the project by getting him to sign at the bottom. As Carol Armstrong has pointed out, the editing of the text is then pushed even further: some of the handwritten excerpts have sections underlined and some of the photographs also have subtitles or titles that reverse the word

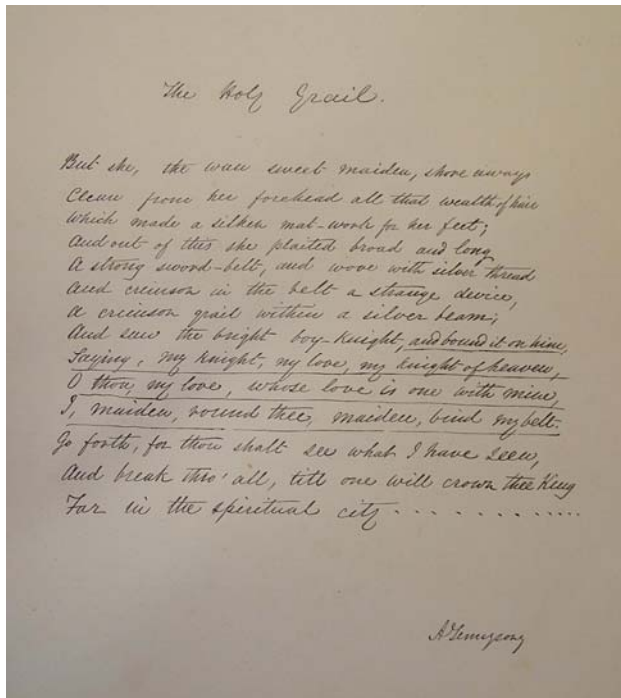


Figure 4: Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King and other Poems Illustrated* by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1874

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order of Tennyson's *Idylls*: 'Merlin and Vivien' is represented by a photograph entitled 'Vivien and Merlin'.<sup>25</sup> Armstrong refers to the cumulative effect of this approach as Cameron's 'usurpation of Tennyson's authorial voice.'<sup>26</sup> Cameron's authorship of the 'Miniature Edition' is pushed a little further by reordering the title, instead of beginning with the poet's name it reads *Illustrations by Julia Margaret Cameron of Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King and other poems*.<sup>27</sup> In Cameron's books the poetry supports the image rather than the other way around: the reader is presented with glimpses and re-authored extracts of Tennyson and then presented with carefully orchestrated images many of which show us scenes with a very different emphasis to Tennyson's poetry.

It is not just Cameron's images but her self-conscious use of the medium that makes her photographs so significant: her refusal to clean up the technical faults in her photographs prevent the process from becoming invisible and viewers are made very aware that they are looking at manufactured images. For many viewers Cameron's portraits and 'Madonna' images overcome these problems but few commentators have found good things to say about her *Idylls* illustrations. These images have the added problem of seeming very contrived especially to viewers used to far more sophisticated *mise-en-scène*. Figure 5 is a case in point. The staginess of this image is hard to avoid: Vivien's posture is melodramatic and the props are amateurish and yet, rather like the 'Dirty Monk' portrait, the image allows us to see Tennyson in a different light. It is tempting to see these strange *tableaux vivants* as a sign of the Cameron's eccentricity but there may be a sense in which they pointed to the future: more than one Cameron scholar



has seen a relationship between these photographs and the development of moving film.<sup>28</sup> The great beauty of some of Cameron's other photographs may be lacking in this, arguably her most ambitious project, but her assertive manipulation of Tennyson and the novel use of the medium imply a significance that went far beyond the Victorian period.



Figure 5: 'Vivien and Merlin from Merlin and Vivien' from *Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King and other poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron*, 1874

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition will be held at The Collection / The Usher Gallery, Lincoln and open in June 2009, it will and co-inside with the conference 'The Young Tennyson' (July 2009) organized by The Tennyson Society and held at the University of Lincoln.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Moxon's edition and an illuminating discussion about the relationship between word and image in illustrated books see Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Kooistra, 'Poetry in the Victorian marketplace: the illustrated *Princess* as a Christmas gift book', in *victorian poetry*, vol.45, no. 1 (Spring 2007), pp.49-76.

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Ricks, ed., *The Poems of Tennyson* (London: Longman, 1969) pp. 354-361.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Poulson, 'Death and the maiden: *The Lady of Shalott* and the Pre Raphaelites' in Ellen Harding (ed.) *Reframing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996) p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt also executed a sketch on the subject in 1850, which is significantly different but can be related to his Moxon design, see Poulson, 'Death and the Maiden', 173'.

<sup>7</sup> For Hunt's version of this encounter see William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1905) pp. 124-5.

<sup>8</sup> For a catalogue entry and reproduction see Jan Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal 1829-1862 Pre Raphaelite Artist* (Sheffield: Sheffield Arts Department, 1991) p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Judith Johnston, *Anna Jameson, Victorian, Feminist, Woman of Letters* (Aldershot, Scholar, 1997) and Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti Faith Gender and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Poulson, 'Death and the maiden', p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> For Waterhouse's experiments with the posture see his sketchbook in The Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum Number E.1110-1963.

<sup>13</sup> Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> The book is held at Peter Nahum's Leicester Galleries, images can be seen at [www.leicestergalleries.com](http://www.leicestergalleries.com). I am grateful to the gallery for allowing me to inspect the book.

<sup>15</sup> Lynne Pearce, *Woman / Image / Text* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Fenton records 'We were there an hour and a half and got two good pictures' though makes no mention of arranging the cannon balls. See Alison Gernsheim and Helmut Gernsheim, *Roger Fenton Photographer of the Crimean War* (New York: Arno, 1973) p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Gernsheim and Gernsheim, *Roger Fenton*, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> For recent accounts of Fenton's photograph and Tennyson's poem see Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) and Helen Groth, 'Technological mediations and the public sphere: Roger Fenton's Crimea exhibition and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*', in *Victorian literature and culture*, vol.30, no. 2 (2002), pp. 553-570. For the text of poem see Ricks, *Poems of Tennyson*, pp. 1034-36.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed account of the relationship between the newspaper reports and Tennyson's poem see Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1989) pp. 324-363.

<sup>20</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, p. 125-7.

<sup>21</sup> Groth, 'Technological mediations', p. 564.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Julian Cox and Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron the Complete Photographs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003) p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Joanne Lukitsh, *Cameron: Her Work and Career* (Rochester, New York: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1986) p. 5.

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<sup>24</sup> For discussions of this commission see Helen Groth, *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 148-184 and Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photographer of Genius* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2003) pp.71-73.

<sup>25</sup> See Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT, 1998) pp. 361-421.

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library*, p.365.

<sup>27</sup> Little is known about the context for the publication of this rare edition but it may have been designed as a gift for friends. See Cox and Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> See Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, p. 73 and Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library*, pp 214-421.